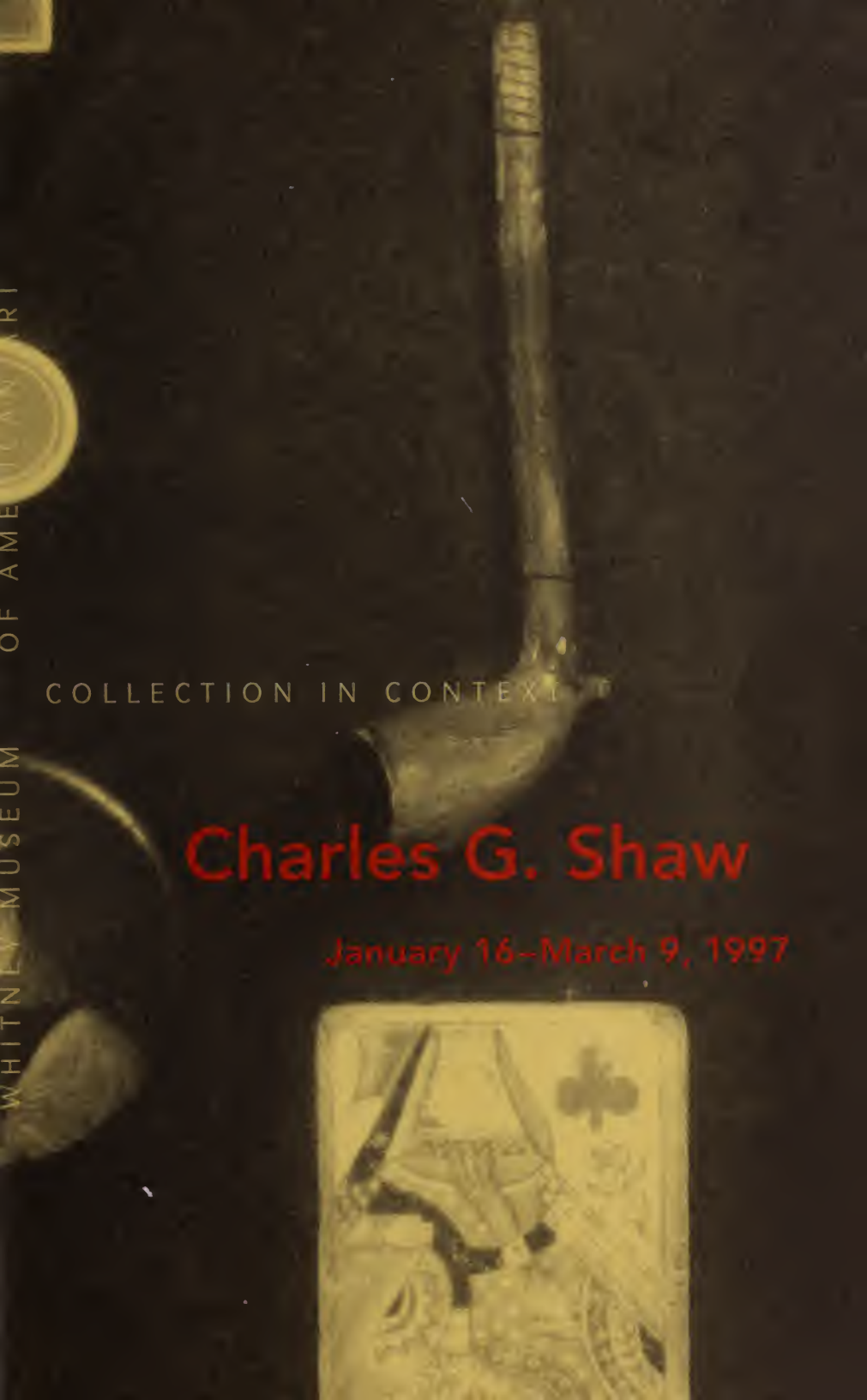
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
COLLECTION IN CONTEXT
Charles G. Shaw
January 16–March 9, 1997

These works by Charles G. Shaw are selected from the collection of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. Carpenter met Shaw in the mid-1960s through the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt. Carpenter, who spends his summers on Nantucket, had once remarked to Reinhardt that there were no important artists on the island. Reinhardt encouraged him to contact Shaw, who also spent time on Nantucket, saying that he was "one of the pioneer abstract painters in America." What resulted was a decade-long friendship.

Carpenter and Shaw passed many an afternoon discussing art over lunch in Shaw's posh, book-lined 57th Street apartment. Although they became good friends, Carpenter was shocked to discover, at Shaw's death, that he was to be the recipient of the artist's work, consisting of hundreds of paintings, drawings, and collages. Since that time, Carpenter has enthusiastically tried to bring Shaw's work to a larger public by helping to organize exhibitions and encouraging American museums to acquire key examples of Shaw's art. Many of the works in this exhibition are in fact gifts to the Whitney Museum.

At first glance, it may seem that the Carpenter-Shaw friendship was an unlikely one. Carpenter, from a humble West Virginia family, was trained in chemistry at the University of Pittsburgh, where he met his first wife, Mary Grace. He moved to Connecticut shortly after his studies, raised two children, and worked as an executive in a chemical company until his retirement. Shaw, on the other hand, as critic Hilton Kramer observed, "was born into a wealthy New York family, educated at the best schools and moved freely in the high society of his youth, spending summers at Newport and attending Christmas parties at Mrs. W.K. Vanderbilt's." A rich, debonair bachelor, Shaw frequently traveled to Europe, was a friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gerald Murphy, and H.L. Mencken, and wrote for *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* when he was not making art.

What united these two men was their interest in seemingly contradictory types of art. Both loved the pared-down, unadorned forms of non-objective abstract painting. Yet both were collectors of applied, decorative art forms. Carpenter is an expert on Tiffany and Gorham silver, while Shaw was a connoisseur of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century playing cards. Perhaps, above all, the two were kindred in their belief that the arts are the highest expression of a refined spirit. Shaw no doubt would have concurred with Carpenter, who wrote: "objects, books, poems and music made with skill, knowledge, flair and love represent the best side of human achievement, far removed from those dreadful phenomena that have haunted us in much of the twentieth century: killing, starvation, hate and ignorance."

Adam D. Weinberg
Curator, Permanent Collection

An Elusive Geometry: The Art of Charles G. Shaw

Overcast, c. 1934

"My night eyes
like the cat's perceive
a magnitude of space
wherein small moving shapes
invade the dark"
—Charles G. Shaw, 1969

Charles G. Shaw (1892-1974) was a private man who left few clues to his artistic motivations and philosophies. But just five years before his death he jotted down this short poem, in carefully penciled script, in a small, spiral-bound sketchbook.[1] Straightforward, and with a spareness that would characterize much of his work, it reflects, if not an artistic philosophy, then certainly a lifelong passion. Abstracted shapes, their ordered emergence from a solid background, can be discerned in virtually all Shaw's vast and eclectic artistic pursuits. Even in a children's book he wrote and illustrated in the 1940s, *It Looked Like Spilt Milk*, a direct, minimal style prevails. Each open spread reveals nothing more than abstract blotches or splashes of white paint on a

dark background, accompanied by a few words of text. Across from the last white shape, the text reads: "It looked like spilt milk. But it was not spilt milk. It was just a cloud in the sky."

In addition to his career as a painter and his brief foray into children's book illustration, Shaw created collages and assemblages, was an award-winning poet, a prolific journalist, a novelist, a photographer, and an authority on such diverse topics as antique playing cards and the writings of Lewis Carroll. He gave no indication of feeling conflicted about his divergent pursuits, and seemed to approach both painting and writing with the same discipline: "I think...one of the major issues I had in mind was form. The form of the thing, whether it was a poem or a piece of prose or a piece of painting."[2]

Shaw's formal artistic training was limited. In 1928, under the instruction of Thomas Hart Benton, he took a life class at the Art Students League, New York. Soon thereafter, he studied with George Luks, one of a group of early twentieth-century realist artists called The Eight. But it took a trip to Paris and visits to the studios of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Fernand Léger, under the tutelage of the modern art supporter and artist Albert Eugene Gallatin, to really spark Shaw's interest in painting. "Why during those days with George Luks and at the League I never heard the word abstract art mentioned or [saw] any examples. Well, it had been going on in Paris for twenty years."[3]

Shaped Picture, 1936

Shaw's conversion to the cause of abstraction was immediate. In the early 1930s, the forty-year-old Shaw was a well-to-do New York society gentleman with an established writing career, and he could have taken up painting as a mere hobby. But he rarely embraced any endeavor so casually. Battling prevailing realist tendencies such as Regionalism and Social Realism that had emerged in America after the Great Depression, he helped found the American Abstract Artists in 1936, a group determined to introduce Americans to non-objective art and to defend its viability as a uniquely American

Untitled (4 Killed, 22) 1940

expression. In the 1930s and 1940s, Shaw had one-artist exhibitions at several New York galleries. At Shaw's exhibition at New York University's Gallery of Living Art, Gallatin declared: "I think there is no question but that Mr. Shaw is doing some of the most important work in abstract painting in America today." His first known paintings, executed in the early 1930s, derive from European Cubism. At this early stage in his career, he believed it worthwhile to "study all the best painters, to copy from reproductions colored and otherwise ..." By 1938 this process resulted in a series of painted and stained wood reliefs.

Untitled (Collage), 1930-40

biomorphic abstractions indebted to the work of Jean Arp. Other paintings from this time, more brightly colored and energetic, with abstracted shapes connected by thin black lines, are reminiscent of Joan Mirō.

In what would emerge as a signature body of work, Shaw began to move away from European precedents toward an indigenous American subject matter. A native New Yorker and a former student of architecture, he soon turned to the city's skyline for what evolved into the series he called the *Plastic Polygon*. "The polygon sprouting, so to speak from the steel and concrete of New York City, I feel to be essentially American in its roots."[6] In a radical move that prefigured the shaped canvases of the 1960s, Shaw stretched his painted canvases over hand-built frames or painted on rectilinear wood reliefs. The resulting stepped profile combined with contrasting light and dark geometric shapes, successfully creates an illusion of foreground and background, the lights and the shadows of a dense cityscape.

Shaw loved illusion and visual trickery, and it—along with a wry sense of humor—informs much of his work. While both his earliest and latest paintings are direct abstract and minimal statements, some of what lies between has a more playful and sometimes surreal quality. In a small, undated oil depicting a large steamer ship or tug boat, collaged newspaper pieces and maps intermingle with painted passages. No doubt, Shaw took delight in the confusion between real objects and painted illusion. Moreover, the newspaper is not just a random piece, but reads in part, "...a partnership engaged as shipbrokers...," while an upside down advertisement proves perplexing and incongruous: "'They Don't Get

Your Wind' Athletes Say." Later, Shaw's collages would lose their lightness and humor, and the appropriated newspaper headlines would become more ominous and dark. In minimally colored collages on gray-brown paperboard, simple shapes, penned black lines, and newspaper headlines concerning violent crime and injustices are combined with a graphic sensibility more akin to commercial design.

Shaw was a dedicated collector of many different things, which later found their way into his art. Like the artist Joseph Cornell, he eventually acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of the materials that would be composed into the framed and boxed assemblages he termed "montages." His collections ranged from cigar store figures and pewter to ancient police truncheons and old clay pipes. But his great love was an exhaustive collection of antique playing cards from Persia, France, China, and elsewhere.

Montage, 1935-50

"Magic, crazy about magic,"[7] he once said of his childhood years. Magic tricks, at least those accomplished with playing cards, may have been what first led to Shaw's fascination with cards and their history. Drawn to their mystical and allegorical qualities, their use as fortune-telling devices and conjurers of spirits and magic, he published two informative essays on the history of cards and their iconographic significance.[8] Though his montages are undated, their sequential numbering suggests a development from the early, complex asymmetrical works to the formal order and spare coolness of his later works. Shaw was no doubt enamored by the results of his endless combinations of cards, with their brocades, ivory gaming counters, ancient coins, marbled paper. He is believed to have produced more than six hundred in less than twenty years. Some of them seem to be uncanny precursors of the serial forms used in later Pop Art, while others relate to the Minimalist paintings Shaw would pursue in the 1960s. These works were private reflections, rarely, if ever, shown in Shaw's lifetime

In the last decade of his life, Shaw returned to the abstract forms of his earlier work, only now in a Minimalist manner more current with his time. Reflecting on his long and varied career, he made an illuminating comment about his artistic philosophy: "I believe that every painting is a new problem and that it must be solved in its own particular way and by its own particular treatment, just as I believe that order is essential in all art, and that an ounce of discipline is worth a gallon of happy accidents."[9]

Beth Venn
Associate Curator, Permanent Collection

Montage (#550), 1935-50

White on Black, 1969

NOTES

1. I am greatly indebted to Charles H. Carpenter, Jr., for allowing me access to not only this sketchbook, but to the volumes of archival material, personal effects, paintings, and montages bequeathed to him upon Shaw's death. His vivid recollections of Shaw in his later years have significantly informed my understanding and appreciation of Charles G. Shaw and his works.

2. Charles G. Shaw, transcript of interview conducted by Paul Cummings, April 15, 1968, p. 21, Charles G. Shaw Papers, Archives of American Art, New York.

3. Ibid., p. 9.

4. "Charles G. Shaw Has One Man Exhibition at New York University's Gallery of Living Art," New York University press release, April 27, 1935, quoted in Buck Pennington, "The 'Floating World' in the Twenties: The Jazz Age and Charles Green Shaw," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 20, no. 4 (1980), p. 22.

5. Charles G. Shaw, undated excerpt from journal, ibid., p. 21.

6. Charles G. Shaw, "The Plastic Polygon," in *Plastique*, no. 3 (1938), p. 29.

7. Cummings interview, p. 38.

8. Charles G. Shaw, "The Versatile Playing Card," *Antiques*, 59 (February 1951), pp. 120-21, and Charles G. Shaw, "Before Kings and Queens Had Two Heads," *Connoisseur*, 128 (January 1952), pp. 162-66.

9. Charles G. Shaw, Whitney Museum of American Art, artist's questionnaire, January 17, 1956.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works listed are by Charles G. Shaw (1892-1974). Works are listed in chronological order, with descriptive titles in parentheses for the works left untitled by the artist. Numbers within titles were given by the artist.

Dimensions are in inches followed by centimeters; height precedes width precedes depth. Unless otherwise noted, works are from the collection of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr.

Self-Portrait, c. 1930
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 (61 x 50.8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Promised Gift of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. P.11.94

Untitled (Collage), 1930-40
Oil and paper on canvas, 10 1/4 x 11 1/8 (32.4 x 28)

Untitled (Collage), 1930-40
Oil and paper on canvas, 16 3/4 x 13 1/2 (42.5 x 34.3)

Overcast, c. 1934
Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 21 3/4 (76.5 x 55.2)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Promised gift of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. P.13.94

Montage, 1935-50
Mixed media, 11 x 13 (28 x 33)

Montage, 1935-50
Mixed media, 21 3/4 x 16 1/4 (55.2 x 41.3)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Promised gift of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. P.17.94

Montage, 1935-50
Mixed media, 17 x 14 (43.2 x 35.6)

Montage (#70), 1935-50
Mixed media, 13 1/4 x 11 1/2 (33.7 x 29.2)

Montage (#400), 1935-50
Mixed media, 23 x 20 (58.4 x 50.8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Promised gift of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. P.20.94

Montage (#439), 1935-50
Mixed media, 12 1/2 x 14 1/2 (31.8 x 36.8)

Montage (#447), 1935-50
Mixed media, 12 x 13 (30.5 x 33)

Montage (#461), 1935-50
Mixed media, 15 x 12 1/2 (38.1 x 31.8)

Montage (#550), 1935-50
Mixed media, 13 x 9 1/2 (33 x 24.1)

Montage (#574), 1935-50
Mixed media, 25 x 22 (63.5 x 55.9)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Promised gift of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. P.19.94

Montage (#701), 1935-50
Mixed media, 8 3/4 x 7 1/4 (22.2 x 18.4)

Shaped Picture, 1936
Oil on wood panel, 19 1/2 x 7 (49.5 x 17.8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Promised gift of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. P.14.94

Untitled (#17), 1936
Oil on canvas, 12 1/4 x 9 5/8 (31.1 x 24.4)

Untitled (#73), 1936
Oil on canvas, 17 1/4 x 9 1/4 (43.8 x 6.7)

New York, 1939
Oil on wood, 30 x 16 (76.2 x 40.6)

Umbilical Contemplation, 1940
Oil on paperboard, 16 x 11 15/16 (40.6 x 30.3)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. 91.58.2

Untitled, 1940
Oil on masonite, 13 1/8 x 14 7/8 (33.3 x 37.8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Promised Gift of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. P.15.94

Untitled, 1940
Oil on canvas, 15 1/2 x 19 1/4 (39.4 x 48.9)

Untitled (4 Killed, 22), 1940
Collage of newsprint, paper, paint, and ink on board, 20 x 15 1/4 (50.8 x 38.7)

Untitled (Girl Slain), 1940
Collage of newsprint, paper, paint, and ink on board, 20 x 15 1/4 (50.8 x 38.7)

Untitled (#79), 1940
Oil on canvas, 21 x 16 (53.3 x 40.6)

Untitled (Death Ring Witness), c. 1940
Collage of newsprint, paper, paint, and ink on board, 20 x 15 1/4 (50.8 x 38.7)

Untitled, 1941
Oil on wood panel, 23 1/8 x 19 (58.7 x 48.3)

Untitled, 1941
Oil on canvas, 17 x 14 (43.2 x 35.6)

Untitled, 1941
Oil on canvas, 17 1/4 x 14 1/4 (43.5 x 36.2)

Plane Abstraction, 1944
Oil on composition board, 39 1/16 x 26 (99.2 x 66)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. 91.58.1

Untitled, 1968
Oil on canvas, four panels, 32 3/4 x 24 5/8 (83.2 x 62.5) overall

Green Above Green, 1969
Oil on canvas, 50 1/2 x 40 1/2 (128.3 x 102.9)

White on Black, 1969
Oil on canvas, 40 3/4 x 50 1/2 (103.5 x 128.3)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Promised gift of Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. P.16.94

Untitled (Trompe l'oeil), n.d.
Oil on canvas, 12 x 9 3/4 (30.5 x 24.8)

Untitled (Trompe l'oeil), n.d.
Oil on canvas, 11 1/2 x 10 (29.2 x 25.4)

Untitled (Trompe l'oeil), n.d.
Oil on canvas, 16 3/4 x 13 1/2 (42.5 x 34.3)

Organized by Beth Venn, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection

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Cover: *Montage*, 1935-50 (detail)

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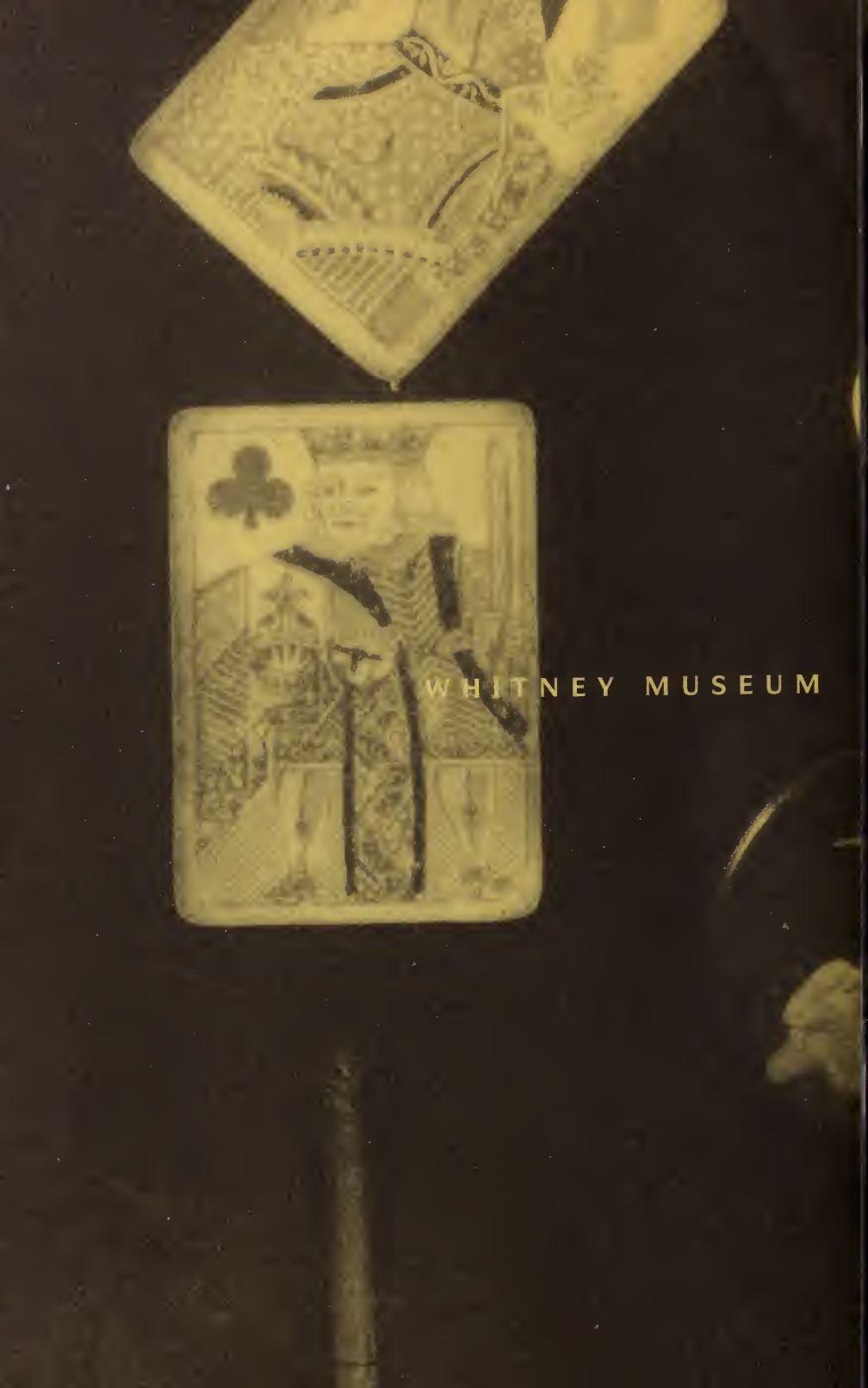
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